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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the need for feedback on course quality focuses on feedback needs once the courses have been used once or more and no longer need initial evaluation. This is termed the maintenance phase of course production. Three central questions are addressed. The first asks why feedback is needed at all, and it is proposed that it is to provide information on overall student reaction, for change in specific course content, for necessary modification in course innovations, to improve tutor briefing and support, for larger university planning, and to assist future students in making decisions about the courses available to them. The second question asks for whom the feedback is being collected. The four audiences, each having different needs for the information, are the course maintenance team, faculty, university committees, and students and tutors. The third question asks what the intended use of the information is. The uses are outlined for each of the four identified audiences. (MSE)

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COLLECTING FEEDBACK DURING COURSE PRESENTATION

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FRED LOCKWOOD

ABSTRACT

As the number of completely new undergraduate courses diminishes, so the number of remakes, and the importance of the maintenance phase of the course production cycle, will increase. In considering this situation three central questions concerning the collection of feedback during course presentation are identified and discussed; the description of a possible model designed to plan feedback collection using existing procedures, is given.

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COLLECTING FEEDBACK DURING COURSE PRESENTATION

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Considerable time and effort is expended in course planning and production*, as reflected in the advice embodied in the Open University Course Production Handbook - A practical guide to the procedures of undergraduate course production.[2] However, the enthusiasm, commitment and industry exhibited by many course teams in the planning and production phases is seldom sustained to the stage where a course enters maintenance; the result is a relatively poor commitment to an evaluation of the effectiveness of the course in actual presentation and an improvement of its teaching based upon student comment and performance. In justification it is often argued that such post hoc evaluation has little to recommend it since the scope for changes to a course in subsequent years of presentation is severely limited. In addition it is observed that as Faculty Profiles develop, and as the needs met by a particular course are fulfilled or their rationale outmoded, courses need to be replaced rather than remade; thus casting doubt on the relevance of the specific feedback amassed. Whilst one must accept the realism of such points, I would argue that for relatively little time and effort it is possible to monitor a course in presentation and relate possible action to the manpower and facilities available to the maintenance team.+ Furthermore, I would argue that because a course is to have a limited life, or is to be replaced, it does not necessarily invalidate the information collected on the effectiveness of course components, approaches, innovations etc. Indeed, a knowledge of the benefits and costs associated with the various elements of a course may provide valuable pointers for other course teams.

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*A description of the course production cycle, including an explanation of the planning, production and maintenance phases, has been produced.[1]

+ This view would appear to have been accepted within the Faculty of Technology where maintenance teams prepare yearly "course appraisal and evaluation records". Whilst such monitoring is on a far more modest scale than previous course evaluations undertaken in Technology[3] it performs a valuable screening function, takes relatively little time and assists in the allocation of resources; advantages not to be easily dismissed.

When a production team is considering its plans for the next phase in the course production cycle it is worth asking:-

"Why do we need feedback on a course at all?" All maintenance teams, to some degree, collect feedback on the course during presentation. They cannot avoid the voluntary and often forceful comments from students and course tutors. Indeed these comments are often invaluable in alerting a maintenance team to unforeseen problems in either course administration, presentation or content. However, at this level a course of action may not be immediately obvious. Unsolicited comments may be unrepresentative and may require systematic investigation before the problem can be specified and action taken. The problem may not become apparent until later on in the period of study thus limiting the action possible. Furthermore, by adopting a passive; "let's wait and see" approach, there is the danger of delay which may mean yet another cohort of students are submitted to a course whilst their performance, perception, etc. are monitored and remedial action agreed (unless some retrospective investigation is possible with its inherent problems). In contrast to the passive mode I would suggest that there are several legitimate reasons for taking the initiative and collecting feedback during the first and subsequent years of presentation.

viz: to provide information;

(i) on overall student reaction to the course (workload, relative difficulty, etc.) thus alerting the maintenance team to potential problems[4]

(ii) relating to specific course content (key concepts, relationships, arguments etc.) so as to guide any immediate change during the first year of presentation and to inform any substantial changes in subsequent years[5]

(iii) on particular course innovations (project components, computer assisted feedback schemes, home experiment kits etc.) thus enabling the maintenance team to evaluate and decide on modification, if any[6]

(iv) on the quality of guidance to tutors (marking schemes, scheduling of materials etc.) so as to improve tutor briefing and support[7]

(v) about the general use of the Open University system (use of study centres, use of playback facilities, access to computer terminals etc.) to guide future course planning and provision[8]

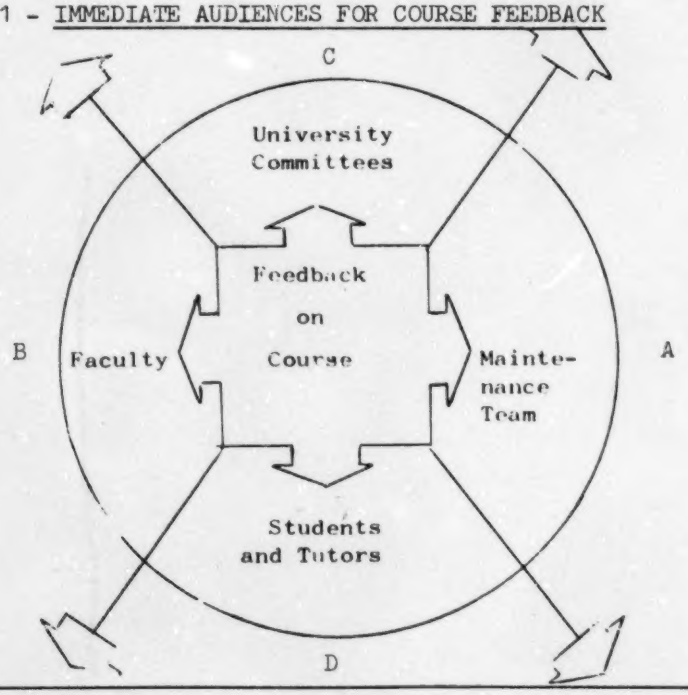
(vi) to assist future students in making an informed decision about courses available to them[9]

The list above gives some indications as to why we may want feedback on a course. Individually these sources of feedback may be limited; they may relate to only one aspect of the overall course, be drawn from only a small sample of the whole population/range of course activities and could embody bias peculiar to themselves. However, in combination they provide an opportunity to obtain an overall and detailed picture of a course from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives may reveal concensus and be a clear guide to rational action, as when information from both part-time tutors[10] and students[11] associated with E201, Personality and Learning resulted in the decision to withdraw part of the course project component. However, even when conflicting views emerge, as when part time tutors identified a unit within PE261, Reading Development, that they considered in need of alteration[12] but which was rated as 'very' or 'fairly interesting' by a high proportion of students and 'very difficult' by relatively few[13], it allowed the maintenance team to reach a decision on the basis of evidence rather than heresay.

A second question that emerges when we consider course feedback is:-

"Who are we collecting it for?" From the above list, (i) to (vi), it is possible to identify four immediate audiences*for course feedback (FIGURE 1); each of which would have different interests in the information provided.

FIGURE 1 - IMMEDIATE AUDIENCES FOR COURSE FEEDBACK



*Wider audiences would include for instance, other academic institutions professional bodies and government departments.

Overall student reaction to a course would be of interest to the maintenance team in providing an overall framework, within which other information could be considered as well as confirming or identifying the main problem areas. The faculty may be interested in comparing student reaction/comment on a course to others within the Faculty Profile; perhaps how student workload on one course compares with another of similar level and student composition. University Committees may be interested in comparing the reception of courses across the University; perhaps in terms of student dropout of failure in examinations. Finally, those students and tutors who took part in the feedback exercise may find the feedback summaries of interest in placing their reactions in context*.

The maintenance team has probably most to gain in the short term from the student feedback, however, the revise product is of definite interest to the consumer - the student. Furthermore, the Faculty, who administer the course, and the University, who liaise with other bodies, have a definite stake in the reception and effectiveness of it. These points are evident when one considers each of the four immediate audience (A to D) in terms of the question:-

"What do we intend to do with feedback once we have it?"

A) For the maintenance team I would suggest there are two or maybe three, courses of action. The first relates to fairly quick action.
i.e. identification of those problems that can be resolved quickly and simply via minor modification and stop press instructions.
A second relates to more substantial changes in the first few years of the life of a course.
i.e. remake of broadcasts, revision of correspondence texts and supplementary materials.
The third, which is speculative, relates to collecting data that may assist the Faculty in any future course production; drawing upon the experience of other course teams in the University.

*Indeed, this belief has prompted the practice whereby feedback is 'fedback' to those students who commented on M101, Mathematics: A Foundation Course.

B) The Faculty, on the evidence assembled by the Maintenance Team, can release funds and redeploy personnel to meet identified needs. It can decide, together with other considerations, to remake, replace or even withdraw a course as well as offering advice with regard to particular approaches, innovations and teaching strategies that have been attempted in other courses. It is obvious that such decisions and advice should be based on evidence that is as reliable and valid as possible. When the quality of the course feedback is in doubt so is the wisdom of implementing any changes to the course.

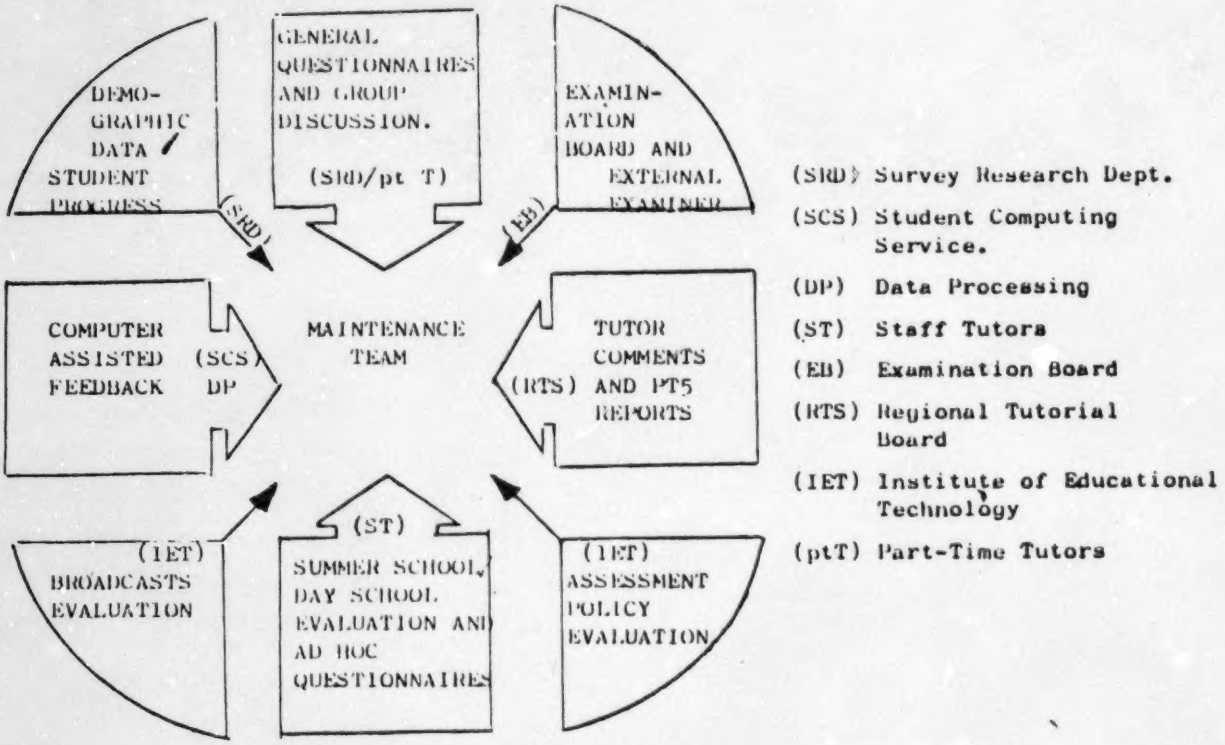
C) Open University Committees, in either advisory or policy making roles, are similarly dependent upon course based evidence. For example, in making policy changes with regard to Developmental Testing courses for credit it has been helpful to draw upon evidence from courses in production.[14]

D) The possibilities for action open to part-time tutors, let alone individual students is limited. However, the 'public relations' function of feeding the results of feedback to tutors and students ought not to be underestimated. Putting the individual's reaction/comment in context may be valuable in redressing extreme views. Besides reassurance it may serve to enable a tutor to give more detailed advice to students and to improve training/briefing sessions in future years.

The above questions and concerns are not new. They have faced Open University Course Teams for the last ten years and have resulted in the provisions of a variety of mechanisms by which to collect feedback during course production.

What is new, I believe, is an attempt to assemble a feedback model (FIGURE 2)* that identifies these main mechanisms and which attempts to meet the various needs of the four immediate audiences described above.

FIGURE 2 Elements providing Maintenance Team with feedback



The elements within rectangles represent sources of data that could be available during the first year of presentation and upon which relatively early action could be taken. They could provide indicators of potential problems that need to be investigated and could assist the Examination Board in its decision making. (Scheduling problems encountered in first year of presentation, error in content or directions etc.).

The elements within the quadrants represent sources of data that could be available relatively late on in the first year - or later still. However, the information they provide may be important for alteration/modification in years when trends or patterns are detected, and could provide data relevant to eventual course revision or remake.
(Appendix A briefly describes the contribution that each of the elements in the feedback model can provide).

*The Maintenance Team, represented in FIGURE 2, should not be regarded as a passive receptor of information but as the focal point in group liaison.

The forgoing discussion and offer of a feedback model has not been assembled on a "take it or leave it" basis. Indeed, I would expect readers to challenge many of the points raised, their selection and implicit assumptions. If, as a result, it prompts course teams to reconsider their own plans for course maintenance - why they need feedback on a course at all, who they are collecting it for, and what they intend to do with the feedback once they have it - then I would be satisfied. (Even if the model I offered was modified beyond recognition!). However, I am not hopeful since the topic of course maintenance has become synonymous with chores that are viewed as unrewarding both in terms of their impact on the course in general and ones individual career in particular..... Perhaps this is the area, the area of identifying attitudes to the tasks associated with maintenance and charging the reward system so as to make maintenance more desirable, that I should have been thinking about all along!

APPENDIX A

General Questionnaire and Group Discussions

A questionnaire which seeks to provide general reaction to all course components, across the whole course, could provide a basic framework within which to interpret other information and be a basis for subsequent discussion with groups of students/tutors*. The structure and content of any such questionnaire would be the responsibility of the Maintenance Team. However, it could call upon SRD for advice and assistance in questionnaire construction, administration and analysis. Indeed, this type of co-operation is a feature of SRD.

Demographic Data/Student Progress

The University collects demographic data from each student following an O.U course (e.g. occupation, courses previously passed etc.). It also records the average CMA and TMA grades as they are awarded. These data are incorporated into periodic 'Student Progress Sheets' which give detailed information about the student population. These documents, together with advice from SRD, may be useful in identifying trends or patterns in the student body that could be reflected in their performance.

Computer Assisted Feedback

Computer assisted tutorial systems, such as Cicero[15] and Merlin[16] provide students with diagnostic questions and depending upon the pattern of answers a student offers, further remedial/developmental material. They also provide, via item analysis procedures, indications of student competence and difficulty.

Computer Marked Assignments, especially those parts devoted to obtaining feedback on specific course components, are able to perform a similar function.

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*In co-operation with Staff Tutors and Part-time Tutors, tutorial groups could be contacted and asked to talk to a member of the maintenance team on an informal but regular basis; the responses/comments obtained supplementing the other data collected.

Broadcast Evaluation

A General Questionnaire could collect information on the conditions of viewing/listening to broadcasts, their scheduling and general student reaction. This data, together with that supplied by tutors and students during discussion, could be used to identify avenues for further detailed investigation. In addition detailed programme evaluation, similar to that performed by the Audio Visual Media Research Group in IET, could be undertaken with a limited number of individual programmes.

Summer School/Day School Evaluation and ad hoc Questionnaires

The effectiveness of the materials/activities presented at Summer Schools/ Day Schools could be evaluated via self completion questionnaires and/or discussions with both part-time tutors and students. Furthermore, the timing of the Summer/day Schools and the "captive" population could be further exploited by collecting information, again by self completion questionnaires and discussion, on topics/areas identified by a General questionnaire.

Assessment Policy Evaluation

The assessment Policy adopted by a course, such as the relationship between formative and summative components, weighting of assignments, tutor involvement prior to submission and actual timing of submissions, may have great impact upon the way course materials are studied and individual assignments tackled. These aspects could be evaluated within questionnaires or discussion groups and could draw upon the advice and assistance of the Student Assessment Research Group within IET.

Tutor Comments and PT5 Reports

Central Regional Tutorial Services is responsible for the implimentation of tutor feedback. In consultation with the maintenance team RTS devises the content, structure and methods of feedback collection appropriate to each course, attempts to integrate this with other information to be collected and attends to much of the administrative effort involved. Whilst meetings for periodic/final de-briefing and telephone contacts are possible the postal questionnaire, based upon PT5 reports, are most common. These forms are completed by tutors, at intervals throughout the course as part of their terms of service. The information obtained from tutors could be used to enhance the specific advice and assistance to tutors as well as mofifying the teaching of the course.

Examinations Board and External Examiner

The Examination Board typically includes the Maintenance Team and thus would have knowledge of all the course feedback previously collected. These data, together with analysis of TMA grades, details of examination performance and the report of the External Examiner could represent an element in the feedback model.

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